

“Perspectives: Do social movements offer viable alternatives for human security?”

Jackie Smith

Prepared for *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*

Contemporary social movements have helped to offer alternative visions of how the world might be organized, challenging neoliberal elites who prefer to argue that there is no alternative to the globalized market economy. At the very least we can argue that movements encourage people to question neoliberal assumptions that government regulations are bad for the economy while policies encouraging competition, selfishness, greed, and the prioritization of monetary wealth over other goods is both noble and socially beneficial. The diverse voices that comprise social movements offer many ideas and alternatives, but taken together we see a common commitment to democratic values such as tolerance, cooperation, compromise, and nonviolent conflict resolution. I believe that social movements' major contribution to the search for alternative ways of organizing our world lies in their work to develop new possibilities for global political and local economic democracy.

The World Social Forums as Experiments in Global Democracy

The World Social Forum Process comprises an annual global meeting complemented by dozens of regional and hundreds of national and local social forums around the world. It began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001, when around 15,000 activists gathered under the slogan, “Another World is Possible.” It is both a protest against the annual World Economic Forum gathering of political and economic elites and a response to critics' arguments that “we know what you're against, but what are you *for*?”

Since 2001, the WSF has met annually in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2002, 2003, 2005); Mumbai, India (2004), Bamako, Mali (2006) Caracas, Venezuela (2006), and Karachi, Pakistan. The resonance of the Forum's message is apparent in the fact that the global meeting now draws over 150,000 participants, and the proliferation of local and regional meetings continues. Organizers see the WSF process as creating “open space” for citizens to explore the impacts of global changes on their local and national experiences at the same time as they cultivate transnational dialogues and networks of social movements to address shared problems.

In a global system where opportunities for citizen participation are conspicuously absent, the WSF helps address the “democratic deficit” in global institutions. By providing spaces for deliberation and discussions about power and representation, the WSF can serve as a laboratory for global democracy. Activists are testing out new forms of participation and representation that can inform official efforts to democratize global institutions.

Because it is a fundamentally decentralized process, the WSF has evolved in ways that may provide a model for more formal mechanisms to enhance global democracy. In its first five years, the WSF process has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation, and I believe this is due to the pervasive culture of democracy that encourages dialogue, respectful efforts to confront and address conflicts, and that is constantly mindful of the

ways power operates to exclude or marginalize some voices over others. In particular, the WSF has moved consistently in the direction of greater decentralization. This has expanded opportunities for people at local levels to be actively involved in global level politics. It has also fostered new forms of networking among activists working on different issues, in different countries, and at different levels of action. And it has generated opportunities that otherwise wouldn't exist for people to learn and practice skills relevant to global advocacy work.

The diversity of voices in the WSF process has also been expanded by the proliferation of local, national and regional Social Forums. More than 80% of participants in any social forum live within the host city's geographic region, and thus the proliferation of forums enable more local activists to participate in the WSF process. The main web site for the WSF links to national social forums on virtually every continent. Regional forums have met in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. In addition, numerous cities have hosted social forums to bring together a broad range of local activists who are increasingly aware of the global sources and the interconnectedness of the problems on which they work. The practice of holding "polycentric" forums in multiple sites was tested successfully this year, as the official World Social Forum was held in Mali, Venezuela, and Pakistan.

The organization of the WSF itself has also become less centralized, and most of the more than 2000 panels are now organized by participants themselves rather than by a central planning committee. Organizers can use an online process for submitting workshop proposals, and the WSF website helps them to link to other groups working on similar themes. The practice of organizing plenary sessions of elite speakers has been dramatically cut back, and the vast majority of WSF programming is now organized by participants themselves rather than by the central planning teams.

Those participating in social forums at any level have unprecedented opportunities to network with other organizations working on diverse issues and with widely varying constituencies. Few structures of modern life provide the opportunities for people from different class, racial, and professional backgrounds to come together to talk politics. But democracy needs such spaces in order to flourish. Moreover, the WSF process enables activists to make better use of technologies that facilitate regular communication across vast differences. But activists note that "the revolution will not be e-mailed," and technology alone cannot generate the robust social ties required for sustained political work. The WSF provides the routine and predictable spaces in which activists can come together, generating the mutual understanding and trust required for global democracy.

Finally, as an ongoing, expanding, and inclusive political space, the WSF creates opportunities for individuals to cultivate the skill that are necessary for global citizenship. We have no elections for global officials, and few international policies are subjected to public debate. National governments rarely consult with their constituents about important international policies. The WSF fills this vacuum by providing a politicized arena where people can learn about and articulate positions on global issues. And they do so as part of a process of dialogue with diverse collections of people, thereby fostering

appreciation for the needs and perspectives of others while cultivating skills at political negotiation and compromise. If we are ever to have a more democratic world, we will need far more people with these sorts of skills.

Creating Local Economic Democracy

The World Social Forums are inspired by the Zapatista slogan that calls for creating “one world with room for many worlds.” And while the Forum process itself nurtures practices and skills that enhance global democracy, the *content* of much of the discussion among activists focuses on specific ways to strengthen local control over the decisions that affect people’s lives. Those protesting against the predominant form of economic globalization are creating new spaces in which “many worlds” might flourish. I outline just a few examples of these alternatives.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Modern agriculture has made farming more fossil-fuel intensive, more mechanized, more large-scale, and less profitable for farmers. Much of the money spent on food today goes not to the farmer, but to retailers, shippers, manufacturers, and marketing firms. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) takes economics to the base of the food chain. It does so by reorganizing the food economy to shorten the distance between producer and consumer. CSA members pay the farmer an annual membership fee to cover the production costs of the farm, and in return they receive a weekly share of the harvest during the local growing season. CSAs help spread the risks and costs of farming by providing farmers with financing at the beginning of the season, thereby reducing or eliminating the need for costly loans, while insuring a minimum income for their harvest. By creating direct relationships between local farmers and community members, CSAs enable small-scale producers to thrive while enhancing local food security, and sovereignty. To the extent that communities (and nations) are self-reliant on food, they are less vulnerable to economic instability as well as to outside political and economic pressure.

Community Currencies & Barter Systems. Community currency and barter systems build on the notion that “money” is a creation of our political institutions and that it needs to be distinguished from real “wealth.” National and international monetary systems, they argue, often devalue things that local communities see as important. For instance, unemployed or underemployed workers may not be able to gain dollars or pesos or yen for their work, but these people’s skills can enhance the local community in various ways. What is lacking is a means for communities to reward work that is necessary and beneficial for the community itself. And fresh produce or locally produced artwork may not be valued by consumers outside a local area, but residents of an area may be willing to pay more for such goods. Local currencies allow local communities themselves to determine what goods and services they value. Often these initiatives grow from communities where a large corporate employer suddenly moves out of the town, causing widespread unemployment and encouraging job-seekers to leave their communities in search of work. Or they emerge in places where rapid inflation undermines people’s economic security, as was the case in Argentina in 2001. The “Ithaca Hours” currency in Ithaca, New York has been operating since the early 1990s, and it has inspired many other communities to print their own money in order to gain more control over local economic choices.

Cooperative Ownership. Social movements have helped advance cooperative ownership models for economic production by organizing such initiatives and encouraging the public to support cooperative production. The most important current example of this kind of initiative is in Argentina, where workers arranged to take ownership of enterprises that failed in the wake of that country's economic collapse. They collectively assumed the risks of ownership of the production facilities and most of the surviving cooperatives have generated wages for workers that are equal or more than before the economic crisis.

Fair Trade Programs. The global economy is organized around the assumption that if governments create policies that encourage the investment of capital to produce profits, the whole of society will benefit (eventually, at least) as wealth "trickles down." Thus, tax policies, government subsidies and spending programs, investments in infrastructures like roadways, energy systems, education, etc. are organized with the aim of helping promote economic growth and profits for wealthy investors and major corporations. Many have argued that these policies don't work and that social programs and policies need to promote more than profit-seeking and economic growth. They must also aim to promote other social goals such as quality education and health care, equitable access to essential resources such as clean water, environmental sustainability, preservation of leisure time, promotion of local economic democracy and choice (so sometimes workers actually own and profit from the land and factories where they work), protection of workers, and wages that support a decent living for workers and families. These values are not factored into the prices of most goods. Fair trade programs are arrangements between consumers and producers that promote these other social values in more limited "markets."

In sum, most of the world's poor are excluded from the world economy simply because they lack the incomes to participate in markets. As governments cut back their spending on social services and turn these over to private, market-driven forces, these people's livelihoods are even more at risk. It is becoming increasingly clear that human security requires more democratic global institutions. That means that instead of allowing global markets and actors determine what kinds of economic development will take place in a region or locale, citizens combine their efforts to help define their own preferences for structuring their local economies. Social movements have been successful at shattering the myth that there is no alternative to a globalized economy. But more importantly, they have developed new structures and spaces that expand the possibilities for more and more people to be actively involved in discussions about what sort of world we want to build. And by developing methods to enhance the choices people have about how they make their living, social movements enhance the autonomy and self-sufficiency of local communities. Without such economic choice, there can be no political democracy.